

"The Octagon" (John Tayloe House) Stable
(American Institute of Architects Library)
1799 New York Avenue, N.W.
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-336

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

"THE OCTAGON" (JOHN TAYLOE HOUSE) STABLE
(Now American Institute of Architects Library)

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Location: At the rear of 1799 New York Avenue, Northwest,
Washington, D.C., at the northeast corner of New
York Avenue and 18th Street, N.W.

Present Owner: The American Institute of Architects.

Present Occupant: The Library of the American Institute of Architects.

Present Use: Library.

Statement of
Significance: This utility structure was built about 1800 behind
the Octagon, which was considered one of the most
elegant early houses in Washington, and for a time
was used as the executive mansion.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The Tayloe Stable was built about 1800 as a part of the development of the Octagon started by Colonel John Tayloe in 1798. The stable, one of several outbuildings, was located about 100 feet behind the mansion. The Octagon is a three and a half story brick residence designed by the architect, William Thornton. The stable was built in a harmonious but simple style. It is a two-story brick structure with twin, arched carriage doors in the center and wide, low-relief arches on the flanking wings.

The Octagon, though not a true octagon, was built to relate to the wedge-shaped site at the corner of New York Avenue and 18th Street, N.W. It was one of the first great townhouses in Washington. Tayloe built the house at the suggestion of George Washington, who was eager to see the Federal City become a seat of culture. The Octagon was the center of a gracious Washington social life; and after the White House was burned in 1814, President Madison used it as a temporary executive mansion. The house served a variety of functions after being confiscated during the Civil War. These included hospital, rooming house, school, and Government Offices. The house eventually fell into disrepair, and for years was reputed to be haunted. The house was purchased and restored by the American Institute of Architects in 1902.

The stable was built some time after the house at the rear of the original lot prior to the purchase of the land to the east of the house and stable. This places the stable construction within the first ten years of the 19th Century. The architect of the stable is unknown, but there is a possibility that it was also designed by Thornton.

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The stable went through good times and bad with the house, but the structure was left unaltered for its first 150 years. In 1953 the American Institute of Architects remodelled the stable as its library and dedicated the structure to its new function in January of 1954. The remodelling was comprehensive and included a new concrete structure and floors and a new roof. In the front of the stable the old carriage doors were replaced by large windows to serve the new reading room.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Tayloe Stable is a two-story red brick, flat roofed structure with a series of arches across the front. The building is situated at the rear of 1741 New York Avenue behind the Octagon, one of Washington's oldest great houses. Both structures were built about 1800 of similar materials. The stable has its original lines, but has been greatly altered on the interior to form a library and has been given new fenestration. The building has been well maintained since its conversion to a library in 1953 by the American Institute of Architects.

The overall size of the structure is 21 by 65 feet. It faces south, toward the main house. The brick masonry walls were built with little in the way of foundations, but these were added when the reinforced concrete structure was placed to convert the building to a library. The condition or location of original chimneys is unknown.

The principal openings in the structure are in the front or south wall. These consist of a pair of high, wide, arched windows located in the former carriage doors. In the semi-circles above the windows are wooden fan panels. On either side of the main block containing the former carriage doors is a wing with a low brick blind arch containing two openings on the first floor and one centered above on the second. These small openings are six-over-six-light double-hung windows except for one on the east side which is the door. A similar blind arch occurs on the west end of the stable overlooking 18th Street. This one has no windows in it.

The trim at the top of the building consists of a flat roof, a short parapet, and a simple cornice molding.

The original first floor plan consisted of a central room for carriages and flanking rooms for stable and tack. The second floor was loft space. When the building was remodelled into a library, the first floor was converted into three main rooms, each of which opens into the next with a wide door. The two end rooms were designed as office space, and the center room became a reading room with a fireplace. The second floor was converted to book stack space.

The one stairway was put in during the 1953 remodelling. It is a small cast iron circular stair running from the first floor to the second. There is no basement or attic.

The interior trim is colonial revival with simple trim and plaster walls and ceilings. The floors are concrete with tile covering.

All hardware and mechanical equipment is typical of the 1950's.

There is a garden to the south between the Octagon and the stable which is otherwise surrounded by office buildings. The structure is across 18th Street from the General Services Administration Building of the United States Government.

Flanking the stables to the east and the north are low rise brick office buildings also owned by the American Institute of Architects. Twenty-five feet to the south of the stables and along the west end of the property is a small smoke house dating from the early 19th Century. It is about 15 feet square and two stories high. There is a high red brick wall running along the New York Avenue and the 18th Street sides of the garden, completely enclosing the space between the house and the stables. The garden is landscaped in a pleasant, informal, manner with large shade trees and flowers.

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Prepared by Donald B. Myer
Architect, NCDC
National Park Service
August 1965

In 1971 the stable, along with the old office building of the American Institute of Architects, was demolished to make way for a new, and much larger, office building for the AIA staff.

Nancy K. Beinke
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
November 1972